

A Paean to *Common Sense*

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Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* did not single handedly bring about the American Revolution, but if it had not been written in 1776, the United States would not have come to be. There were many factors and actors that took us from a discontented but loyal Crown colony to Revolution and the establishment of an independent United States of America, but Paine's fiery pamphlet was a necessary piece. *Common Sense*, in pamphlet form, was eagerly purchased by a public hungry for information. It was masterfully written. A less artful *Common Sense* would not have served. Paine's arguments were extraordinarily persuasive. Public opinion matters. It matters today. It mattered in 1776.

The decades prior to 1776 were a time of growing discontent in the Colonies. The earlier French and Indian Wars were fought on the American Continent had been costly. The view of the Crown was that the wars were fought for the benefit of the Colonies, and, therefore, the Colonials should bear a significant portion of the cost. The Colonials, in turn, felt that the wars were essentially a European conflict played out on the American Continent, where it did not belong. Taxes were imposed, resented, resisted, rescinded, revised, reinstated, and resented and resisted again.

The tensions over taxes led to strains in the relationship between the Colonies and the Mother Country. These began with the complaint voiced in the slogan "No taxation without representation" and escalated from there. The crisis could end in a negotiated reconciliation; it could end in suppression by force; it could lead to complete separation from England. It was not clear how it would end. Paine, however, was clear on how it should end. He called for revolu-

tion and complete freedom from the Crown. He got what he wished for: the fatal skirmishes, on April 19, 1775, between the Red Coats and New England militiamen at Lexington and Concord put the New England colonies in a state of open insurrection. The remaining Colonies followed in turn.

Before the widespread dissemination of *Common Sense*, only a small number of well-educated radical Revolutionaries had thought deeply about independence, what it implied, and what was required post-independence. Only a small number of Colonists were committed to independence; many were unhappy with Colonial rule but hoped for a reconciliation and settlement that improved the condition of Colonials; others were fence sitters; some were outright supporters of the Crown (the Tories). Paine's purpose was to move the fence sitters to decide for independence and to provide a sense of urgency to those who were already decided. *Common Sense* informed, educated, and moved a great many theretofore uncommitted Colonials to active and passionate support of independence

Common Sense achieved Paine's purpose with spectacular and unprecedented success. No other tract calling a Nation to action so directly and so clearly led to the called-for action. How Paine achieved this is worth exploring. The best way to do this is to read or reread *Common Sense* in its entirety. Thomas Paine's skills are manifested in every aspect of *Common Sense*: organization, pace, length, language, tone, logic, allusion, turn of phrase, addressing counter arguments, understanding his audience, and more. One can, and should, examine individual aspects of the writing in order to appreciate its brilliance, but also one should look at the work holistically. All elements of this powerfully persuasive document work in harmony to achieve its effect.

Specific complaints against the Crown and the call for independence come late in the piece. A discussion of government, the necessity for its being, its origins, and its preferred form,

comes first. Government is a necessary evil and the less government, the better. Paine's views would please modern-day Libertarians. A multi-faceted, brutally effective attack on Monarchy as an institution follows. God and the Bible are enlisted in the effort. When Paine concludes his attack on Monarchy, he has already won the day. Nevertheless, he goes on to enumerate the flaws in the English version of Monarchy. All this is accomplished before he speaks to the shortcomings of the current Monarch and Parliament.

A reader of *Common Sense* is given no room to believe that things might improve under a different Monarch or a new Parliament and Prime Minister. Paine had shown that the system was rotten. Beyond the evils of Monarchy in general and its evils, still preserved in England, was the exploitive relationship between Colony and Homeland. By the time Paine got to the section titled "THOUGHTS ON THE PRESENT STATE OF AMERICAN AFFAIRS," most readers were convinced that it was wrong to live as Colonials under King George III. There must be change. Paine, from this point, argues for independence and the creation of a new Nation as the only sensible way forward. That, not many months later, we declared our independence and tenaciously resisted England's military efforts to crush the Revolution was not a coincidence.

In 1775 and early 1776 when Paine wrote *Common Sense*, we were in a state of insurrection; Colonial Militiamen and British Redcoats had clashed. Boston harbor was blockaded. The city was under military occupation. Paine did not have to call for rebellion: we were already in rebellion. The question was, "How would it all end?" The answer was not clear. There were many who hoped that negotiation, compromise, and concessions by the Crown would lead to reconciliation and restoration of order. It was to this body of opinion that Paine focused his argument. If these Reconcilers could be moved to become supporters of independence, independence would come. Paine did this by adding to his argument against the British Monarchy the his-

tory of repeated instances of taxes imposed, taxes resisted, taxes rescinded, and taxes reinstated, with no change in the Colonies status and privileges, particularly representation. Reconciliation would only perpetuate the cycle.

Once readers were convinced of the need for independence, Paine addressed timing. He argued effectively for acting now. There were no good reasons for delay. He pointed out that without independence we could not hope to get assistance from France or Spain or any other foreign power. No state would support rebels. The reasons for this were custom, propriety, and self-interest. A new nation, however, would be given aid and recognition, especially from those who welcomed any diminution of British power. It turned out to be so. An added incentive for choosing independence was Paine's prescient vision of the great Nation we would become if only we were independent. Our strong sense of American exceptionalism began early in our history.

Paine asserts that independence would be good for England as well as the Colonies: "It is the commerce and not the conquest of America, by which England is to be benefited, and that would in a great measure continue, were the countries as independant [*sic*] of each other as France and Spain..." This argument was not going to convince Tories to join the cause. Rather, it was meant to show that independence made sense, common sense, for all, even if the Crown could not see it.

Later editions of *Common Sense* include an Appendix that rails against a speech made by King George the III concerning the Colonies and scolds the Quakers for publishing an epistle critical of the independence movement. Paine, in the main body of *Common Sense*, sometimes shows anger. In the Appendix, the tone is hot throughout. A good example is Paine telling the Quakers to stay out of affairs that they have no business being involved in: "Wherefore, this

epistle is not so properly addressed to you as a religious, but as a political body, dabbling in matters, which the professed Quietude of your Principles instruct you not to meddle with.”

In order to fully appreciate *Common Sense*, I urge you to read or reread it. If you do, put yourself back in time and imagine that you are a Colonial living in New York, Philadelphia, or Boston. Be a patriot. Feel aggrieved, but remember that all you have known is Monarchy. Up until this moment, you have thought of yourself as a Loyal Subject of the Crown, and you don't have an example to follow as the French did when they overthrew their Monarchy. Let yourself be persuaded, or not, that independence and independence now was right for the Colonies. Appreciate the skill of the author as he alternates between cool logical arguments and appeals to passion. Paine persuaded me. I hope he persuades you, though what really matters is that he persuaded a sufficient number of Colonials to believe that independence was the right course, in order that it could come to be.